



# Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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*I am the mistress of spices. I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone. The gems with their cold clear light. The liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island. But the spices are my love. I know their origins, and what their colors signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at first, when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood. From amachur to zafran, they bow to my command. At a whisper they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magical powers.*

— *Mistress of Spices*

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1957
- \* Lived in India, and immigrated to the United States at age 19
- \* Her works revolve around Indian-born women negotiating old- and new-world values

## Biography

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in 1957 in Calcutta, India. One of her first memories is that of her grandfather telling her the stories from Ramayan and Mahabharat, ancient Indian epics. She quickly noticed that “interestingly, unlike the male heroes, the main relationships [the] women had were with the opposite sex—with their husbands, sons, lovers, or opponents. They never had any important women friends.” This topic would eventually become very important to Divakaruni’s writing. Divakaruni was raised as and still is a devout Hindu. She attended a convent school in India run by Irish nuns during her childhood. She went on to earn a bachelor’s degree from the University of Calcutta.

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# Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

## Biography continued

In 1976, at the age of 19, Divakaruni immigrated to the United States. She continued her education in the United States by earning a master's degree in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. Divakaruni held many different jobs to pay for education, including babysitting, selling merchandise in an Indian boutique, slicing bread at a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab. Divakaruni did not begin to write fiction until after she graduated from Berkeley, when she came to the realization that, "I loved teaching but didn't want to do academic writing. I didn't have enough heart in it. I wanted to write something more immediate" (Mehta).

Divakaruni moved around the country, living in Chicago and Ohio before moving to her present location in Sunnyvale, California, in 1979. Today she lives with her husband and two children and teaches creative writing at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, CA. Divakaruni has also been active in her community. In 1991, she established MAITRI, a hotline for South Asian women who are victims of domestic abuse or abusive situations.

Divakaruni's books, which are set in both India and America, "feature Indian-born women torn between Old and New World values. She gives laser-like insight and skilled use of story, plot, and lyrical description to give readers a many-layered look at her characters and their respective worlds, which are filled with fear, hope, and discovery" (Doubleday). Most of her work is partially autobiographical and based on the lives of Indian immigrants she has dealt with. She says that she writes to help unite people by breaking down old stereotypes.

Her first works were books of poetry, *Dark like the River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), and *Black Candle* (1991). She still was not very well-known after these works. Divakaruni then decided she would like to write prose so she enrolled in a fiction writing class. The professor was so impressed by Divakaruni's work that he showed it to an agent, who, in turn, secured a contract for Divakaruni with Doubleday. In 1995 Divakaruni published *Arranged Marriage*, a collection of short stories. "In *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni beautifully tells stories about immigrant brides who are 'both liberated and trapped by cultural changes' and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own" (Patel). The book addresses issues such as racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. The book was awarded the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Prize for Fiction, the Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation.



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## Biography continued

In 1997, Divakaruni wrote her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*. “The book has a very mystical quality to it, and, as Divakaruni puts it, ‘I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of the twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable’” (Patel). The main character of the book, Tito, owns a spice shop in an Indian community in Oakland, California. She becomes involved in the lives of the customers and helps them through abusive husbands, racism, generational conflicts, and drug abuse. The book was shortlisted for the Orange Prize from England and was named one of the best books of 1997 by the Los Angeles Times.

*Sister of My Heart*, published in 1998, is Divakaruni’s most recent novel. The book explores the tension between the desires of mothers who embrace traditional Indian culture, and the cousins, who embrace the new Western philosophies. Divakaruni has published another collection of poetry, *Leaving Yuba City*, in 1997. These poems also deal with immigrant women and their struggles to find themselves in a New World. Selections from this collection have won the Pushcart Prize and an Allen Ginsberg prize.

Divakaruni once explained her reason for writing: “There is a certain spirituality, not necessarily religious—the essence of spirituality—that is at the heart of the Indian psyche, that finds the divine in everything. It was important for me to start writing about my own reality and that of my community” (Doubleday).



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